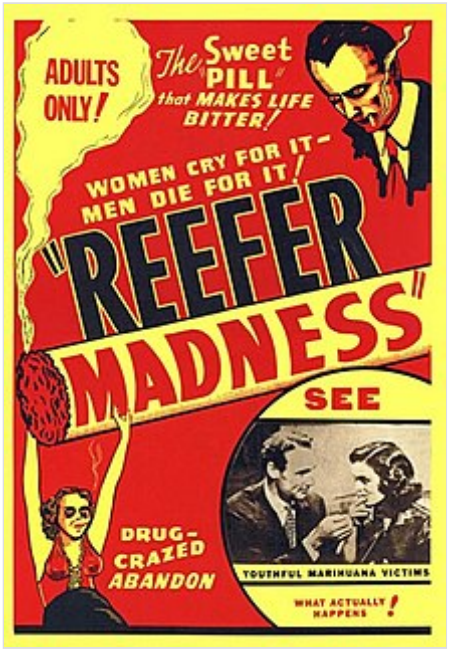
Reefer Madness

Reefer Madness (originally made as ***Tell Your Children*** and sometimes titled as ***The Burning Question***, ***Dope Addict***, ***Doped Youth***, and ***Love Madness***) is a 1936 American propaganda film revolving around the melodramatic events that ensue when high school students are lured by pushers to try marijuana—from a hit and run accident, to manslaughter, suicide, attempted rape, hallucinations, and descent into madness due to marijuana addiction. The film was directed by Louis Gasnier and featured a cast of mainly little-known actors.

Originally financed by a church group under the title *Tell Your Children*, the film was intended to be shown to parents as a morality tale attempting to teach them about the dangers of cannabis use.[5] However, soon after the film was shot, it was purchased by producer Dwain Esper, who re-cut the film for distribution on the exploitation film circuit, exploiting vulgar interest while escaping censorship under the guise of moral guidance, beginning in 1938–1939 through the 1940s and 1950s.[5]

The film was "rediscovered" in the early 1970s and gained new life as an unintentional satire among advocates of cannabis policy reform.[5][6] Critics, however, have panned it as one of the worst films ever made.[7][8] Today, it is in the public domain in the United States.[6].

Reefer Madness



1972 theatrical release poster

Directed by	Louis J. Gasnier
Produced by	George Hirliman (1936 film) Dwain Esper (1938/39 release)
Screenplay by	Arthur Hoerl
Story by	Lawrence Meade
Starring	Dorothy Short Kenneth Craig Lillian Miles Dave O'Brien Thelma White Warren McCollum Carleton Young
Cinematography	Jack Greenhalgh
Edited by	Carl Pierson

Contents

Plot
Cast
Production and history
Reception
Adaptations
See also
References
External links

Plot

Mae Coleman and Jack Perry are an unmarried couple living together and selling marijuana. Mae prefers to sell marijuana to customers her own age, whereas the unscrupulous Jack sells it to teenagers. Ralph Wiley, a psychotic ex-college student turned fellow dealer, and Blanche help Jack sell cannabis to students. Young students Bill Harper and Jimmy Lane are invited to Mae and Jack's apartment by Blanche and Ralph. Jimmy takes Bill to the party. There, Jack runs out of reefer. Jimmy, who has a car, drives him to pick up some more. Arriving

at Jack's boss' "headquarters," he gets out and Jimmy asks him for a cigarette. Jack gives him a joint. Later, when Jack comes back down and gets into the car, Jimmy drives off dangerously, along the way running over a pedestrian with his car. A few days later, Jack tells Jimmy that the pedestrian died of his injuries. Jack agrees to keep Jimmy's name out of the case, providing he agrees to "forget he was ever in Mae's apartment". Jimmy does indeed escape the consequences of his crime—a rare occurrence in the film.

Distributed by	Motion Picture Ventures
Release date	1936, 1938[1][2] or 1939[3][4]
Running time	68 minutes
Country	United States
Language	English
Budget	$100,000

Ralph is arrested for Jack's murder.

Bill begins an affair with Blanche. Mary, Jimmy's sister and Bill's girlfriend, goes to Mae's apartment looking for Jimmy and accepts a joint from Ralph, thinking it to be a normal cigarette. When she refuses Ralph's advances, he tries to rape her. Bill comes out of the bedroom after having sex with Blanche and hallucinates that Mary strips for Ralph. He attacks Ralph. As the two are fighting, Jack tries to break it up by hitting Bill with the butt of his gun. The gun goes off and Mary is fatally shot. Jack puts the gun in the hand of an unconscious Bill and wakes him up. Bill sees the gun in his hand and is led to believe that he has killed Mary. The group of dealers lies low for a while in Blanche's apartment while Bill's trial takes place. Ralph loses his mind and wants to tell the police who is actually responsible for Mary's death. The film attributes Ralph's insanity to marijuana use.

Seeking advice from his boss, Jack is told to shoot Ralph so he keeps his mouth shut. Meanwhile, at the apartment, Blanche offers to play some piano music for Ralph to keep his mind off things. They are both very high and Ralph tells her to play faster. Jack shows up and Ralph immediately senses that Jack wants to kill him so he beats Jack to death. The police arrest Ralph, Mae and Blanche. Mae talks and the gang is rounded up. Blanche explains that Bill was innocent and he is released. Blanche is then held as a material witness for the case against Ralph but, rather than testify against him, she jumps out a window and falls to her death. Ralph is put in an asylum for the criminally insane "for the rest of his natural life".

The film's story is told in bracketing sequences at a lecture given at a Parent Teacher Association meeting by the high school principal, Dr. Alfred Carroll. At the end of the film, he tells the parents he has been told that events similar to those he has described are likely to happen again and then points to random parents in the audience and warns that "the next tragedy may be that of your daughter ... or your son ... or yours or yours ..." before pointing straight at the camera and saying emphatically "... or YOURS!" as the words "TELL YOUR CHILDREN" appear on the screen.

Cast

- Dave O'Brien as Ralph Wiley
- Dorothy Short as Mary Lane
- Kenneth Craig as Bill Harper
- Carleton Young as Jack Perry
- Lillian Miles as Blanche
- Thelma White as Mae Coleman
- Warren McCollum as Jimmy Lane
- Walter McGrail as The Drug Ring Boss
- Ed LeSaint as The Judge
- William Royle as The Prosecutor

- Josef Forte as Dr. Alfred Carroll
- Mary McLaren as Mrs. Lane
- Marin Sais as Mrs. Harper
- Ed Mortimer as Mr. Harper
- Pat Royale as Agnes
- Lester Dorr as Joe, the Malt Shop Owner
- Dick Alexander as Pete Daly, Pusher
- Forrest Taylor as Blanche's Lawyer
- Ted Wraye as "Hot Fingers"
- Dan Wolheim as Detective at the Lane Home
- Edward Earle as Bill's Attorney
- Frank O'Conner as Jury Foreman
- James Ard as Officer Chuckman
- Harry Harvey, Jr. as Junior Harper

Play media
Reefer Madness

Play media
Reefer Madness, 1938 release

Production and history

"If you want a good smoke, try one of these."

In 1936 or 1938,[9] *Tell Your Children* was financed and made by a church group and intended to be shown to parents as a morality tale attempting to teach them about the dangers of cannabis use.[5][6][10] It was originally produced by George Hirliman;[11] however sometime after the film was made, it was purchased by exploitation filmmaker Dwain Esper, who inserted salacious shots.[5] In 1938[1][2] or 1939,[3][4] Esper began distributing it on the exploitation circuit[5] where it was originally released in at least four territories, each with their own title for the film:[12] the first territory to screen it was the South, where it went by *Tell Your Children* (1938 or 1939).[13] West of Denver, Colorado, the film was generally known as *Doped Youth* (1940).[13] In New England, it was known as *Reefer Madness* (1940[13] or 1947),[9] while in the Pennsylvania/West Virginia territory it was called *The Burning Question* (1940).[12][13] The film was then screened all over the country during the 1940s under these various titles and Albert Dezel of Detroit eventually bought all rights in 1951 for use in roadshow screenings throughout the 1950s.[13]

Such education-exploitation films were common in the years following adoption of the stricter version of the Production Code in 1934. Other films included Esper's own earlier *Marihuana* (1936) and Elmer Clifton's *Assassin of Youth* (1937) and the subject of cannabis was particularly popular in the hysteria surrounding Anslinger's 1937 Marihuana Tax Act.

The concept of after-market films in film distribution had not yet been developed, especially for films that existed outside the confines of the studio system, and were therefore considered "forbidden fruit." For this reason, neither Esper nor original producer George Hirliman bothered to protect the film's copyright; it thus had an improper copyright notice invalidating the copyright.[14] Over 30 years later, in the spring of 1972, the founder of NORML, Keith Stroup, found a copy of the film in the Library of Congress archives and bought a print for $297.[15][16] As part of a fundraising campaign, NORML showed *Reefer Madness* on college campuses up and down California, asking a $1 donation for admission and raising $16,000 toward support for the California Marijuana Initiative, a political group that sought to legalize marijuana in the 1972 fall elections.[16] Robert Shaye of New Line Cinema eventually heard about the underground hit and went to see it at the Bleecker Street Cinema.[14] He

noticed the film carried an improper copyright notice and realized it was in the public domain.[14] Seeking material for New Line's college circuit, he was able to obtain an original copy from a collector and began distributing the film nationally, "making a small fortune for New Line."[14]

Reception

Reefer Madness is considered to be a cult classic and one of the best examples of a midnight movie. Its fans enjoy the film for the same unintentionally campy production values that made it a hit in the 1970s.[6]

The *Los Angeles Times* has claimed that *Reefer Madness* was the first film that a generation embraced as "the worst."[8] Leonard Maltin has called it "the granddaddy of all 'Worst' movies."[17] *Las Vegas CityLife* named it the "worst ever" runner-up to *Plan 9 from Outer Space*,[18] and AMC described it as "one of the worst movies ever made."[19] The film holds a 46% approval rating on aggregator website Rotten Tomatoes.[20]

Adaptations

Sean Abley's stage adaptation, *Reefer Madness*, ran for a year in Chicago in 1992, and had one showing in 1993 as well.[21]

American rock band Mötley Crüe featured a couple of clips from the film in the video for their song "Smoke the Sky" from their self-titled 1994 album. The song's lyrics deal with marijuana use.

The film was spoofed in the 1998 musical *Reefer Madness* (1998), which was later made into the television film *Reefer Madness* (2005), which featured actors Alan Cumming, Kristen Bell, Christian Campbell and Ana Gasteyer.

In 2004, 20th Century Fox, in collaboration with Legend Films, released a colorized version on DVD.[22] The original release date was April 20, 2004, a reference to the drug slang term "420". Also during the film, the number "4" and then "20" is flashed very quickly (as a joke on subliminal messages), which is an effect added by Legend Films. It features intentionally unrealistic color schemes that add to the film's campy humor. The smoke from the "marihuana" was made to appear green, blue, orange and purple, each person's colored smoke representing their mood and the different "levels of 'addiction'".[10] The DVD also included a short film called *Grandpa's Marijuana Handbook*; a new trailer for *Reefer Madness* produced by Legend Films; and two audio commentaries: one discussing the color design and the other being a comedic commentary by Michael J. Nelson, formerly of *Mystery Science Theater 3000* fame.

A scene from the colorized version of the film.

Legend owns the copyright to the colorized version. While most have praised it for its campy treatment of the cult film, some viewers claimed that the color choices would better suit a film about LSD than a film about cannabis.[23]

In May 2018, Angry Demon Productions out of Detroit, MI, in collaboration with LegacyVerse Productions from Sandusky, OH, started filming a low-budget Independent Film remake under the original working title 'Tell Your Children'. While most of the film has been modernized a bit through cell phones and laptops instead of desk rotary phones & filing cabinets (as examples), this remake still has about 75% scene for scene and use of original dialog with deliberate liberal use of overacting and campy humor. It also implements a selective color technique similar to that of Sin City by Robert Rodriguez.[24][25] Release date is expected early 2019.

See also

- *Hemp for Victory*

- List of films in the public domain in the United States
- *Perversion for Profit*
- *Sex Madness*
- *How to Undress in Front of Your Husband*

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External links

- *Reefer Madness (https://archive.org/details/reefer_madness1938)* is available for free download at the Internet Archive
- *Reefer Madness* (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0028346/) on IMDb
- *Reefer Madness* (http://www.tcm.turner.com/tcmdb/title/title.jsp?stid=87909) at the TCM Movie Database
- *Reefer Madness* (https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/reefer_madness) at Rotten Tomatoes

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